

## THE NEW VOICES OF MARGINS: FROM VEMULA TO UNA

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### ABSTRACT

Post Ambedkarite movement for Dalit emancipation has been filled with internal variations which made them susceptible to the pressure of the power-politics. In Uttar Pradesh, the assertion of *BahujanSamaj Party* initiated a new era of democratization, while the upsurge of Dalit castes through Buddhist conversion somehow ushered a social change in Maharashtra. Yet, both this separate phenomena suffer from internal anomalies with what Ambedkar had visualized. Those movements had narrow and power-centric perspective having limited effects on socio, cultural and economic status of the community and also being the representative of particular caste /castes in politics it operates in the circle of hierarchal relationship without actually breaking the permanent pure-impure dichotomy. However, the movement which have been taking in shape from death of RohitVemula, a research student in Hyderabad university, to Una atrocity against Dalit, is totally different in nature. It is beyond party politics and getting support of newly emerging Dalit civil- society. Apart from reservations and discrimination issues in public space/institution, they also take up issues around wage labor and economic justice. This paper will analyze and explain the new trends of these movements. Keeping this in mind, it seeks to unfold that if there is any new trend for emergence of class consciousness within Dalit community.

**KEYWORDS:** Politics, Economic Justice, Movements

### INTRODUCTION

#### Dalit Movement and its Weakness

During the past two centuries, religious, social, political and economic reforms sought to address the Dalit problem so as to transform India from the caste-ridden system of discrimination into a modern and caste-neutral society. But, these reforms have not sufficiently succeeded in improving either the social standing of Dalits or their economic condition. The movements have been facing crisis in many dimensions.

Political field is a key for any emancipatory movement in a democratic society. Soon after getting disillusioned with the caste Hindus in the *Mahad* struggles in 1927, Baba saheb

Ambedkar gave up his efforts towards bringing about social reforms in the Hindu society and turned towards newly emerging opportunities in politics. He formed two political parties, viz., the Independent Labor Party in 1936 and later in response to the increasing communal stances in politics, the Scheduled Caste Federation (SCF) in 1942. At the far end of his life, he conceived a different political formation to bring together all the non-communist progressive forces under a single banner styled as the Republican Party of India (RPI). Unfortunately he did not live longer to see it formed.

During 1980 onwards the emergence of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), a Dalit- based party, has been one of the most significant developments in the society and polity of North-India.

As Sudha Pai argued “it has carried forward the democratic revolution for Dalit and introduced some radical aspects into the ideology underlying the movement, which distinguish it from its predecessor, the RPI. In the social field, it has created a new identity and a counter-ideology to the Varna system of ‘Dalit’ and ‘Ambedkarism’, respectively” (pai, 2002). In the post-Ambedkar era, Kanshi Ram(the founder of BSP) became the true torchbearer of Ambedkarite struggle in the political arena. The political “Bahaman” was one of the most imaginative political categories, which Kanshi Ram coined to overturn the dominant generalization that the deprived classes are always submissive bearers of political power. But In its recent ‘avatar’,(in coalition phase ) the BSP is riding the chariot of power with the help of a community, which is notoriously condemned in history by the ideologues and thinkers of Bahujans for its shrewdness, greed of power and criminal valorization of their social status. Keeping such a partner in power can compel the BSP to dilute the vital issues of social justice, law and order and secularism. Secondly, there is a threat that due to its fixation on power, the BSP will forget the ethical idea of empowering the “Bahujans”. In the thirst of capturing “Sarvajan”, there is a possibility of compromise in delivering social justice to the Bahujan masses. Similarly, Sanjeev kumar H.M has noted that. Allied with the socially powerful groups like the upper-caste Hindu elite BSP have diluted and degenerated the very spirit of Dalit emancipation. These are the limitations of movement on political field. (H.M, 2015)

The religious and social fields are not insulated either. Ambedkar saw Buddhism as a means to end the caste system in India and therefore, he called for the conversion of Dalit to Buddhism in 1956, as escape route from caste based society that considered them to be the lowest in the hierarchy. In the social domain, Ambedkar assumed that conversion, as a conscious apparatus of subaltern masses will bring radical changes in the socio-cultural relationships of Indian society. Buddhism, at the first stage, would de-caste the Dalits from their primordial caste identity and in the progressive run to “establish the kingdom of righteousness” would counter the orthodox religiosity of Hinduism. In the battle between the scientific temperament of Buddhism and the irrational doctrine of Brahmanism, the destruction of Hinduism is inevitable. Thus, Ambedkar’s conversion movement idealized a peaceful functioning of social transformation along with the progress of the modern nation state. The Buddhist conversion movement as a substitute to Hindus’ social hierarchy argues for the annihilation of the caste-based social system and upholds an ideology based on social justice and equal opportunities. It represents a new moral self for the individual citizen in public to claim the benefits of liberal democracy. It constructs a positive collective culture of people based on a fraternal and rational ethos and finally it symbolizes a vision for the reconstruction of society by bringing the issue of “social democracy” into the mainstream debates of political development. The conversion movement further aspired to change the discourse from “politics of caste” to a moral domain of “public religion”. In Maharashtra only the *Mahar* and *Mang* castes among the Dalits have somehow succeeded in making a concrete sense of the Buddhist conversion movement in the recent past, but have left many other Dalit castes out of this purview. This success is nominal as it has failed to carry forward this movement in other parts of the country. On the eve of his conversion to Buddhism, Ambedkar had formed Bharatiya Bouddha Mahasabha (BBM) (Buddhist Society of India) to manage the integrity of the neo-Buddhist community. BBM suffered multiple splits and it is virtually difficult to know how many of them exist. Almost, every town and city has multiple BBMs but without any connection with the central one. Besides, there are other Buddhist organizations with different labels.

Neo-liberal market has been failed as remedy to Dalit discrimination and exclusion in India. Again caste system, which advocates norm of “fixed occupation”, is a hurdle for it because the caste system has regulated the social and economic life of the people in India. A body of social science literature and particularly, theoretical insights from economics recognize that in its essential form, caste as a system of social and economic governance or organization (of production and distribution) is based on certain customary rules and norms, which are unique and distinct. In general, caste-based society and economy is one in which property rights (or occupations) are hereditary, compulsory and endogamous. The caste system’s fundamental characteristics of described and compulsory occupations, concomitantly fixed with economic rights for each caste, imply exclusion of one caste from undertaking the occupation of another. Though The Dalit Indian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (DICCI), founded in 2005, is predicated upon the liberating power of the market. And the National Scheduled Castes Finance and Development Corporation (NSCFDC)—meant to provide capital and mentoring—was established back in 1989. And also, the Modi government has bet on Dalit empowerment via the market in the form of its Stand- UP India initiative, launched earlier this year—a scheme for encouraging Greenfield enterprises by SC/ST and female entrepreneurs by facilitating bank loans between Rs.10 lakh and Rs.1 crore, along with supplementary measures. But, Dalit capitalism also faces significant hurdles; markets, after all, exist within a societal context. Caste and community links play a role in various aspects of the Indian market, from securing capital to integration into supply chains. There is rarely a clear demarcation between formal business networks and informal community networks; the latter are essential for the trust-based transactions that are common in a country like India.

The fuzziness of these social networks interferes with market logic; demand and supply must be mediated via caste discrimination. The result is what political scientist Aseem Prakash has termed the “unfavorable inclusion” of Dalits in the market. (Prakash, may, 2012)

### **Vemula and Una Incident**

Rohith Chakravarthi Vemula was a Dalit PhD scholar and an ASA (AmbedkarStudents’ Association) member who was suspended from Hyderabad Central University over a political dispute with the ABVP (Akhil Bharatiya VidyarthiParishad) last year. On January 17, Rohith committed suicide in a hostel room. The tragic death of Rohith Vemula triggered protests across the country. Their willingness to die has generally been accepted as an act of self-sacrifice — an intense moral pressure on society and the structures of power. It was also a kind of reaction against dehumanization as he faced for his belonging from Dalitcommunity. Rohit’s suicide note has also, willy-nilly, portrayed an act of resistance. By giving glimpses of a bright, aspiring, caring person with great potential, it has forced his university and concerned citizens far beyond its campus to introspect about systematized caste-based discrimination.

A similar kind of movement emerged from Una (Gujarat) due to atrocity against Dalit. On July -11, a shocking video of seven Dalit men being brutally beaten up by a group of Gaurakshaks (cow protector )for allegedly skinning a dead cow in Gujarat’s Una district. In the video, some of the victims were seen tied to a car, while the accused were beating them up. It was later reported that the victims were also paraded and flogged publicly all the way to the police station. The incident sparked protest and, Dalits took out a rally and blocked traffic in the main square of Una town of the district. After the police intervened and tried to persuade them, the protesters dispersed and allowed vehicular movement.

A week later, a congress councilor and four [other Dalit-youth attempted suicide in front of police station](#) in Gondal by allegedly consuming phenyl by alleging inaction by the authorities in the case. Also a group of Dalits camped outside the office of district collector in Surendrangar with animal carcasses loaded in five vehicles.

They also demanded strict action against those who tortured the Dalits and threatened that they will stop disposing animal carcasses if attacks continued on their community members.. A month after this incident they started historic ten-day, 350-km padyatra (March) that end on August 15.

### **New Trends in Dalit Movement**

These two incidents gave birth to a similar kind of movement which is unique and different from earlier Dalit movements in many ways. It was spontaneous, with a publicly stated non-violent approach and it had no political affiliation. Ordinary people supported it in large numbers, where local participation was spontaneous. There were no celebrity leaders or speakers. Undertaken on a shoestring budget, it had several groups coming together — trade unions, Dalit Sangharsh Samitis, workers' unions, youth groups and individuals. Participants came from all over India and Dalit leaders from Punjab, Bihar, Andhra Pradesh and Telangana joined in. This movement is mainly led by new generation which is well educated; rights oriented and not ready to tolerate any form of atrocities and violation of human rights on the basis of caste and race.

It raises the vital issues related to Dalit apart from the issues of discrimination and social justice. In fact, it also made demands for economic right and radical land reform for example, “You take cow’s tail, give us land,” Jignesh Mavani, a lawyer-turned politician who establish Una Dalit Atachiyar Ladat Samiti [ UDALS] and led the march, told the huge gathering. He demanded of giving five acres land to each Dalit families in next one month. For Dalit to make progress, it requires that they took up issues around wage labor and they take up issues around economic justice.

This movement is trying to reach out to all the sections of society beyond ideological and caste limitations. On the one hand issue of Rohit brought huge support from left wings student organization in J.N.U and on the other hand Gujarat Yatra Is Bringing Dalits, Muslims

Together in Shared Anger. Muslims in Una and from other parts of the state also marched into the flag ceremony declaring their solidarity with Dalits and making an attempt to create a new political force consisting of Dalits and Muslims.

But here challenge is that Left groups have to immerse themselves in the Dalit movement and other such struggles and show that they are fundamentally committed to the interests of marginalized groups. If they do this, then they can bring these movements into a broader agenda. Here is a challenge which could be seen in Dalit –Muslim coalition as Faisal Devji argues Muslim community does not and cannot exist as a political entity (Faisal Devji 31agust2016)

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